Dr Guillotin - reformer and humanitarian

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Keywords: Dr Guillotin; medicine; French Revolution; guillotine

France at the time of the French Revolution was a place of political, social and cultural change. The Revolution brought about a radical reform of medical education which paved the way for the development of modern medicine. The reformist movement was pioneered by many eminent doctors, among them Dr Joseph Ignace Guillotin (Figure 1). He is probably best remembered today for the decapitating machine bearing his name. He had, however, a medical and political career which is worthy of consideration.

He was born on 28 May 1738 at Saintes, in the Saintonge region north of Bordeaux, the second son of Joseph Alexandre Guillotin, a wealthy lawyer, and his wife, Catherine Agatha Martin. His premature birth, according to family tradition was precipitated when Madam Guillotin was startled by the screams of a man being broken on the wheel. For the man whose later renown was linked to the issues of torture and death, it is an apt tale[1].

Figure 1. Dr Joseph Ignace Guillotin - portrait by an anonymous artist. From the Musée Carnavalet, Rue de Sévigné, Paris. Reproduced with the permission of the musées de la Ville de Paris © by SPADEM 1990

Priest and academic

Details of his early life are obscure, but in his youth he trained as a Jesuit and remained with the order until 1763. Turning from the ministry of the soul to that of the body, he took up the study of medicine in Paris, where he was awarded his doctorate in 1770.

Settling in Paris, he established a large and profitable practice. He continued his association with academic medicine and by 1784 was a fully accredited professeur, a docteur régent, at the Paris Faculty of Medicine[2]. These docteurs régents held the monopoly of teaching medicine in the capital. Using approved texts they lectured in Latin, sometimes with the assistance of a prosector who performed dissections. The approach was philosophical and no clinical or practical experience was needed to obtain a medical degree. This method was not uniformly accepted and the Societé Royale de Médicine actively encouraged observation and experiment. A growing number of doctors advocated changes in the medical teaching programme, stressing the need for a practical clinically-orientated approach. The most notable challenge was by prominent surgeons led by Pierre-Joseph Desault, Desbois de Rochefort and Antoine Petit. Regardless of this, it appears Dr Guillotin remained a traditionalist, at least for a time.

Nonetheless, he was interested in many public health issues and during the 1770s wrote reports on vinegar, rabies and the drainage of swamps for the Government. From a memorandum on rabies written in 1775/76, it is evident that Guillotin was concerned about the question of torture and death. Pursuing a theme propounded by the philosopher Denis Diderot, he suggested that convicts should undergo 'all such experiments as have been attempted with animals', and expressed the hope that they might in this way be reintegrated into society. While he recognized the cruelty of this, he questioned whether it would quite match the suffering engendered by executions; 'A biting sensation, the painful symptoms of illness - are these to be compared with the appalling torments undergone by a man whose bones are being broken, who is forced to expire in the anguish of despair?'

A popular hero

His public and academic standing was acknowledged in 1784 when he was nominated to an official commission investigating the methods of Antoine Mesmer. This was a great honour as his colleagues were distinguished scientists and members of the Paris Academy of Sciences. They were the astronomer Jean-Sylvian Bailly, the naturalist Antoine-Laurent de Jussieu, the chemist Antoine Lavoisier and the president of the Philosophical Society of Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin.

0141-0768/90/106637-03/$02.00/0

Franz Antoine Mesmer (1734-1815) of Itznang, Switzerland, advocated the use of 'animal magnetism' during hypnotic seances in treating his patients[3]. Attempting to practise mesmerism in Vienna, he was investigated by the court of Maria Theresa and compelled to leave the city. Arriving in Paris in 1778 he quickly established a foothold and within a short time was making a great deal of money. His book, containing his ideas on mesmerism (*Mémoire sur la découverte du magnétisme animal*) was published in 1779. His unorthodox methods of practice became a source of scandal and concern in Paris in 1784 at which time an official investigative committee was convened. A majority decision of the committee dubbed Mesmer a charlatan, agreeing that cures with 'magnetic fluid' were due to the patients' imaginations.

The Commission's report received a favourable reception and enhanced Guillotin's public standing, encouraging him to espouse public issues. These were being debated daily in the famous Masonic Lodge of the Nine Sisters to which he belonged, and formed the most urgent topic of conversation amongst his colleagues and friends. Most pressing was that France had a near bankrupt monarchy, a corrupt aristocracy and a large discontented populace (Third Estate). The obvious solution to the educated middle class was of increased representation for them and the lower classes, with all representatives assembling in the Estates General. A contemporary cry stated 'The Third Estate is not an order, it is the nation itself'.

Infused with the spirit of this philosophy, Guillotin instigated a 'Petition from the citizens of Paris' demanding double representation for the Third Estate in Government, on 8 December 1788. He was sponsored by the six merchant guilds of the city and 6000 copies of the petition were distributed under its aegis. The parliament attempted to suppress its circulation and took steps against Guillotin. He was arraigned before the court, but the crowd demonstrating in his favour was so noisily intimidating that his acquittal was virtually a foregone conclusion. He was now a popular hero[4].

Reform of medical practice

Elected a deputy from Paris to the National Assembly in Spring of 1789, he applied himself conscientiously to his work. No match for the colourful oratory of many speakers, he became involved in improving facilities at the Paris meeting hall (Halle des Menus Plaisirs). His efforts led to the installation of lighting rods, benches with backrests and cushions, windows that opened to permit ventilation and even toilets. When the newly elected delegates found themselves locked out of their meeting hall in June 1789, which was being prepared for a royal occasion, it was Guillotin who recommended an alternative venue, a tennis court in Rue du Vieux Versailles. Here, following heated discussion, the delegates swore the Tennis Court Oath 'never to be dissolved until a solid and equitable Constitution was formed'.

He was elected a member of the Poverty Committee, which was chaired by the Duc de la Rochefoucald-Liancourt, an enlightened social reformer. This committee set about conducting nationwide surveys of hospitals, asylums, orphanages and homes for the aged. Guillotin served on the subcommittee for the ailing poor and for foundlings. He was a member of the inspection team that toured the Hotel Dieu and several orphanages and helped draft the report drawing attention to the shocking conditions in these institutions.

The state of the Hotel Dieu is vividly described by Jacobeus-René Tenon in an earlier account in 1788. There were some 1220 beds most of which contained from four to six patients. The larger halls contained over 800 patients crowded on pallets or often lying about miserably on heaps of straw. Vermin and filth abounded and the ventilation was so abominable that the attendants and inspectors would not enter in the morning without a sponge dipped in vinegar held to their faces. Septic fevers and other infections were the rule. In the surgical ward all patients were grouped together and the operations were performed in the centre of the room. The average mortality was 20% and recovery from surgical operations was, in the nature of things, a rarity.

As one of 17 physicians in the Assembly he was especially concerned with the needs of the sick rather than the misfortunate and argued for the establishment of a separate Health Committee. This was agreed by the Assembly and he became its first chairman. The Committee set about reviewing the state of medical education and practice, pharmacy and midwifery. During wideranging and extensive Committee hearings, submissions were heard from prominent doctors and scientists. The 'Reform Plan for French Medicine' presented by the celebrated anatomist, Felix Vicq d'Azyr to the Committee on 11 November 1790 was to form the basis for Guillotin's 'Bill for Medical Reform' one year later.

This Bill outlined the need for newer teaching programmes and proper regulation of medical practice. The new curriculum stipulated the need to link clinical teaching with practical training. It was not until 1794 when the Jacobins were ousted that the long awaited medical reforms began with the setting up of Health Schools in Paris, Montpelier and Strasbourg[5]. This innovative approach made Paris the centre of medical progress for a generation and formed the basis of modern medicine[6].

Birth of the guillotine

Reform of the Penal Code was also on his mind and it is with this that his name is inexorably linked. Concerned with inequalities in the judicial system and the gruesome punishments prevalent at the time, he proposed a reform of the Penal Code on humanitarian and egalitarian grounds. His ideas were summarized in a Bill of six articles presented to the Assembly on 10 October 1789. The two most widely cited are Articles 1 and 6.

1 Crimes of the same kind shall be punished by the same kinds of punishment, whatever the rank or estate of the criminal.

6 Whenever the death penalty is decreed its execution shall be identical whatever the crime. The culprit shall be beheaded by a simple mechanism.

His proposals, which did not include abolition of the death penalty, accorded with the intellectual and philosophical thought of the time; a retention of the deterrent value of capital punishment while mitigating the suffering caused. He argued that a decapitating machine was more humane: 'The device strikes like lightning, the head flies, blood spouts, the man has ceased to live'. Contrary to popular belief the decapitation machine considerably predated 1789 and was widely known, albeit in slightly different

forms; the mannaia in Italy, the Halifax gibbet in England and the Maiden in Scotland.

Guillotin's Bill was controversial and was debated at length. The first article was passed quickly with articles 2, 3 and 4 being adopted shortly afterwards on 21 January 1790. This constituted a substantial reform, for in addition to excluding considerations of rank in the apportioning of punishment, Guillotin's law abolished confiscation of goods and secured the rights of the family over the dead man's body. The rights of the condemned man and his family were thus for the first time acknowledged.

Debate on the sixth and most enlightened of the proposals referring to the 'simple mechanism' was deferred. This delay is significant, for the Assembly's refusal even to debate the article clearly indicates the radical transformation of contemporary ideas concerning capital punishment implicit in Guillotin's proposal. The public of 1790 were not ready for this change either and Guillotin and his simple mechanism were ridiculed. The humorists and satirists seized this opportunity and the guillotine's first appearance met with unexpected derision. Its proponent immediately became a figure of fun and the butt of numerous epigrams and songs.

The debate on the death penalty and the mode of death finally took place a year later on 30 May 1791. The death penalty remained and on 3 June it was agreed that all persons sentenced to death should be decapitated. Guillotin, disillusioned at the initial reaction to his proposal had distanced himself from the further debate. The Assembly commissioned Dr Louis, permanent secretary of the Academy of Surgery to design an efficient machine. His report 'Avis motivé sur la mode de décollation' was presented to the Assembly on 17 March 1792. A machine was built in April and inaugurated with the execution of a criminal Nicolas Jacques Pelletier on 25 April 1792.

It was the start of a busy time when the guillotine was to progress from being an object of ridicule at the outset to becoming a symbol of the Revolution. Guillotin was scandalised by the name given to the machine and the use it was set to. It is said that he carried his philanthrophy so far as to provide his friends with tablets of his own making which would give them the option of suicide if ever they were in danger of going to the guillotine.

A bitter retirement

He left Paris during the Reign of Terror for Arras, Robespierre's native town. Here he took up a position as director of the Military Hospital. After a year he returned to Paris and was briefly imprisoned there (3 October to 4 November 1795) for having written and signed illegal petitions and statements.

With the restoration of law and order under Napoleon Bonaparte, Guillotin's life was less troubled but his remaining years were nonetheless bitter. Retired from the political arena he maintained an interest in public health. As Chairman of the Central Vaccination Committee he worked with La Rochefoucald-Liancourt, Michel Augustin Thouret and Phillipe Pinel, in promoting the introduction of Jennerian vaccination to combat smallpox. In Edward Jenner's correspondence of this time there is a brief note from Joseph Ignace Guillotin concerning the procurement of vaccine for the general good[7].

Guillotin was a traditionalist at heart and yearned for the ancien régime. He felt that the medical profession had been downgraded and had lost its dignity. In September 1804, he and other regent doctors of the 18th Century Faculty of Medicine founded the Academy of Medicine of Paris[8]. Its stated goal was to bring doctors together in order to raise the status of medical practice. However, its procedure was deemed outmoded and hierarchial and it was largely unsuccessful.

Guillotin died on 26 March 1814, shortly before the defeat of Napoleon and the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy. He left a widow but no children. He was a philanthropist, generous and both erudite and clever. The simple machine born out of humanitarian intentions bestowed upon his name a hideous immortality[9]. Dr Bourru delivering the funeral oration on 28 March 1814 sought to lighten the onerous legacy saying 'How true it is that it is difficult to benefit mankind without some unpleasantness resulting for oneself'.

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(Accepted 15 January 1990)